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ABSTRACT

This study investigated whether or not a traumatic death experience of another person (by suicide, homicide, unexpected illness, or accidental death) would impact the world assumptions of traditional college age students. The study also attempted to determine which independent variables (age at which the experience occurred, type of traumatic death, number of deaths experienced, relationship to the deceased, witnessing the death, and social support from family and friends) would predict three world assumptions held by traditional undergraduate students (benevolence of the world, meaningfulness of the world, and perceived self-worth). A sample of 354 undergraduate students from four Texas universities completed the study; 251 of the students in the group had had exposure to traumatic death; 103 students were in the non-exposure group. Data was gathered through a demographic survey; a world assumptions scale; and two scales measuring perceived social support-family and perceived social support-friends. Results indicated that there were no significant differences between groups on the world assumptions scale. Age at which the traumatic death occurred, relationship to the deceased, and social support from the family significantly related to benevolence of the world. Social support from the family significantly related to perceived self-worth. (Contains 32 references.) (SM)

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Running Head: TRAUMATIC DEATH

The Impact of Traumatic Death Experiences on the World Assumptions of Traditional Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

Prior research has indicated that a traumatic experience can have psychological effects on individuals. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of traumatic death experiences on traditional college-age students' assumptions about the world.

The Impact of Traumatic Death Experiences on the World Assumptions of Traditional Undergraduate Students

Researchers believe that individuals entering college face tremendous change and turbulence, both within themselves and in their environment (Chickering, 1969; Erikson, 1968; Perry, 1970). Especially affected are individuals who have previously been exposed to a traumatic experience. The impact of previous trauma may hinder students as they experience further losses and separations during their lives, including normal developmental transitions.

Previous research has shown that a traumatic event can effect college-age students (Bradach & Jordan, 1995; Janoff-Bulman, 1989; Overcash, Calhoun, Cann, & Tedeschi, 1996; Vrana & Lautervach, 1994), and this may suggest that their assumptions about their worlds have been radically altered in some way (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Research dealing with trauma has focused on the psychological effects that individuals may endure as a result of a traumatic event (Janoff-Bulman, 1989; Janoff-Bulman & Frieze, 1983; Norris, 1992). Traumatic events disrupt individuals' daily functioning both psychologically and socially within themselves and with others around them (Inglehart, 1991). The extent of the impact on the survivor appears to depend on several demographic variables, such as age (Bloom, 1987; Carter & McGoldrick, 1989), age the individual was affected (Lonetto, 1980; Schaeffer & Lyons, 1986), type of death experienced (Michalowski, 1976; Sheskin & Wallace, 1976), number of deaths experienced (Boney-McCoy & Finkelhor, 1996; Norris, 1992), relationship to the deceased (Freudenberger & Gallagher, 1995), whether the death was witnessed (Figley, 1985; Michalowski, 1976), and social support of family

and friends (Cobb, 1976; Lyons, 1991).

In summary, the problem under investigation is the relationship between traumatic exposures and world assumptions. The significance of this impact was highlighted by Schwartzberg and Janoff-Bulman (1991), who investigated the impact of a recent parental death on world assumptions of college-age students. The study involved assessing world assumptions of students who had lost a parent within the last 3 years (the death not involving murder or suicide). This group was then compared to a matched control group who had not suffered any parental deaths. The results indicated that students who had suffered a recent parental death had different world assumptions than students within the control group. The bereaved students were "less likely to believe in a meaningful world" (p. 270) than were the students within the control group. In this study, Schwartzberg and Janoff-Bulman investigated parental death, but they did not investigate "important differences between sudden versus expected death" (p. 285). Another limitation found was that this research did not address death by suicide or homicide, nor did it investigate relationships other than parental.

The purpose of this study was twofold. First, the researchers attempted to discover whether or not a traumatic death experience of another individual-- suicide, homicide, natural death (unexpected illness), or accidental death -- impacted the world assumptions of traditional college-age students. Second, the researchers attempted to find what independent variables (age at which traumatic death experience occurred, type of traumatic death experienced, number of deaths experienced, relationship to the deceased, witnessing the death, and social support from family and friends) would be predictors of

the three world assumptions on the World Assumptions Scale: benevolence of the world, meaningfulness of the world, and perceived self-worth.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers examined the effects of exposure to a traumatic death of another individual on traditional college-age individuals' world assumptions. Janoff-Bulman's (1989) World Assumptions Scale was used to assess these world assumptions. This instrument assessed three different assumptions: (a) benevolence of the world (extent to which people view the world positively or negatively), (b) meaningfulness of the world (explanation of why events happen to particular people), and (c) perceived self worth (a global evaluation of oneself).

Participants

Three hundred and fifty-four undergraduates were selected for this study. The sample includes students from four universities in east Texas. The surveys were administered until there were two hundred and fifty-one students in the group with exposure and one hundred and three students in the non-exposure group. The participants were traditional college-age students, 18-25 years old. The exposure group was composed of participants who had experienced a traumatic death of another through either a homicide, suicide, natural death (unexpected illness), or accidental death. The non-exposed group was composed of participants who had not experienced a traumatic death of another through either a homicide, suicide, natural death (unexpected illness), or accidental death.

Instrumentation

Four instruments were completed by the participants in this study. The first was a

demographic instrument. The second instrument was Janoff-Bulman's (1989) World Assumptions Scale, a 32-item tool that assessed an individual's basic assumptions toward the world. The scale is grounded on the principle that everyone has cognitive representations for the way that they think and process information that include expectations of the world and human beings (Marris, 1974; Parkes, 1975). The 32 questions on the survey represent three different assumptions: benevolence of the world, meaningfulness of the world, and perceived self-worth. The third instrument was Procidano and Heller's (1983) Perceived Social Support-Family (PSS-Fa) and Perceived Social Support-Friends (PSS-Fr) Scales. Both scales consisted of a 20-item self-report which measured "the extent to which an individual perceives that his or her needs for support, information, and feedback are fulfilled by friends and family" (p. 2). The scale consisted of 20 questions which were subjective - - yes, no, or don't know- - answers. A numerical score of 0-20; the higher the score the more social support was indicated on the scale (Procidano and Heller, 1983).

Hypotheses

Hypothesis One.

There will be a significant mean difference between those exposed to a traumatic death experience of another and those not exposed to a traumatic death experience of another on the three scales of the World Assumptions Scale.

Hypothesis Two.

Age at which traumatic death experience occurred, type of traumatic death experience, number of deaths experienced, relationship to the deceased, if the death was

witnessed, social support from family and social support from friends will be predictive of the Benevolence of the World Scale as measured by the World Assumptions Scale.

Hypothesis Three.

Hypothesis Three addressed the extent to which age at which traumatic death experience occurred, type of traumatic death experience, number of deaths experienced, relationship to the deceased, if the death was witnessed, social support from family and social support from friends will be predictive of the Meaningfulness of the World Scale as measured by the World Assumptions Scale.

Hypothesis Four.

Hypothesis Four addressed the extent to which age at which traumatic death experience occurred, type of traumatic death experience, number of deaths experienced, relationship to the deceased, if the death was witnessed, social support from family and social support from friends will be predictive of the Perceived Self-Worth Scale as measured by the World Assumptions Scale.

RESULTS

The major purpose of this study was to examine the impact of traumatic death experiences of an individual on college-age students' world assumptions as measured by the World Assumptions Scale.

Hypothesis One

Hypothesis One addressed the differences between those exposed to a traumatic death experience of another and those not exposed to a traumatic death experience of another on the cumulative score on the World Assumptions Scale. Results indicated that

no significant difference between the participants exposed to a traumatic death and those participants not exposed to a traumatic death were found.

Hypothesis Two

Hypothesis Two addressed the extent to which age at which traumatic death experience occurred, type of traumatic death experience, number of deaths experienced, relationship to the deceased, if the death was witnessed, social support from family and social support from friends predicted scores on the Benevolence of the World Scale as measured by the World Assumptions Scale. The variable type of traumatic death experience, number of deaths experienced, if the death was witnessed, and social support from friends were eliminated in the backward multiple regression. Six percent of the variance on the Benevolence of World Scale was accounted for by age at which the traumatic death was experienced, relationship to the deceased, and social support from the family. The results indicate that the older the age of death was experienced the more positive their perceptions toward benevolence of the world. The closer the relationship to the deceased the more positive their perceptions toward the benevolence of the world. The more social support for the family the more positive their perceptions toward the benevolence of the world.

Hypothesis Three

Hypothesis Three addressed the extent to which age at which traumatic death experience occurred, type of traumatic death experience, number of deaths experienced, relationship to the deceased, if the death was witnessed, social support from family and social support from friends predicted scores on the Meaningfulness of the World Scale. In

the backward multiple regression used to predict Meaningfulness of the World Scale all variables were eliminated, therefore no predictions were significant.

Hypothesis Four

Hypothesis Four addressed the extent to which age at which traumatic death experience occurred, type of traumatic death experience, number of deaths experienced, relationship to the deceased, if the death was witnessed, social support from family and social support from friends predicted scores on the Perceived Self-Worth Scale as measured by the World Assumptions Scale. The variable types of traumatic death experience, number of deaths experienced, relationship to the deceased, if the death was witnessed, and social support from friends were eliminated in the backward multiple regression. Three percent of the variance on the Perceived Self-Worth Scale was accounted for by social support from the family. The results indicate more social support from the family the more positive their perceptions toward perceived self-worth.

Discussion

Many researchers have found that the disruptive effect of a traumatic experience is related to other demographic variables, such as age (Bloom, 1987; Carter & McGoldrick, 1989), age the individual was affected (Lonetto, 1980; Schaeffer & Lyons, 1986), type of death experienced (Michalowski, 1976; Sheskin & Wallace, 1976), number of deaths experienced (Boney-McCoy & Finkelhor, 1996; Norris, 1992), relationship to the deceased (Freudenberger & Gallagher, 1995), and social support of family and friends (Cobb, 1976; Lyons, 1991).

Many researchers have found that the age at which a death is experienced may affect

the way an individual view's death as well as the meaning that is attributed to the event. The age at which the child was exposed to the death affects their views of themselves and the world (Lonetto, 1980; Schaeffer & Lyons, 1986; Stevenson, 1987). James (1994) went further and stated that a traumatic experience could affect a child's development, mentally and emotionally. This appeared evident in the results of the current study. The findings implied that the age at which the exposure to the traumatic death occurred accounted for six percent of the variance in benevolence of the world. This is supportive of the fact that individuals who were older and more developed emotionally and psychologically when the death occurred had more positive perceptions toward benevolence of the world.

The type of death one is exposed to can affect world assumptions. In support of this statement Michalowski (1976) felt that the manner in which one dies determines the meaning of death, not the act of death itself. Lundin (1984) went further to suggest that exposure to a sudden or violent death could cause intense grief which may lead to a variety of emotions and assumptive changes within an individual (Hodgkinson, Joseph, Yule, & Williams, 1995). These findings, however, were not supported by this study. This study found that the type of traumatic death exposure did not affect world assumptions. This finding is different than the above research possibly because of the limited population which was surveyed.

Findings suggest that the relationship to the deceased affects survivors.

Freudenberger and Gallagher (1995) investigated the impact of a parental death on children of various ages. The results suggested that children who lost a parent were affected by their loss. The researchers noticed that these children yearned for their parents, some of them continuing to do so in later life. In another study by Scheeringa and Zeanah (1995) they found similar results when studying participants under 48 months of age. They found that even at this young age individuals who experienced a trauma of their care-giver developed symptoms of fear and aggressiveness. This is indicative that the relationship to the deceased could have an impact on an individuals perceptions toward themselves and the world.

Ganellen and Blaney's (1984) study suggest that social support offered to individuals experiencing a trauma enabled them to face the crisis and work through to a possible solution. This supports the findings that social support from one's family was predictive of a person having a more positive outlook toward the benevolence of the world and also having a more positive perception of self-worth. This coping mechanism may allow individuals faced with a trauma to reestablish their beliefs in the benevolence of the world as well as their self worth in a safe and supportive environment. Another study that is supportive of these findings examined social support from family, friends, community, and legal professionals. The results indicate that a person who feels that there is support in a healthy and stable environment was able to adapt in a more healthy manner to a traumatic event than individuals who did not have social support (Symonds, 1980).

These findings indicate that counselors may want to focus more on the person who experienced the traumatic death, than on the traumatic death alone. It appears that a

person's perception toward the world and themselves is significantly related to when the death was experienced, who died, and the level of support from family. These factors play a crucial role in determining world assumptions in the present and future.

Summary

The lack of research concerning exposure to the impact of traumatic death on world assumptions provided the rationale for this investigation. The study was designed to examine if exposure to traumatic death impacted world assumptions. The study then went further to investigate what types of demographic variables might affect world assumptions upon being exposed to traumatic death.

The analyses showed some significant results. One multiple regression showed that age at which the traumatic death occurred, relationship to the deceased, and social support from the family were significantly related to benevolence of the world. Another multiple regression indicated that social support from the family was significantly related to perceived self-worth.

Thus, there appeared to be differences in individuals who were exposed to a traumatic death in regards to the age of exposure, relationship to the deceased, and social support from the family. This suggests that counselors may want to investigate more carefully the traumatic death experience for each different person and use their findings within pertinent interventions.

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